Critical Essay

Dang! Synesthetic Representations of the Post-Internet in Caroline Polachek's *The Late Show* Performance

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Abstract

This paper examines Caroline Polachek's 2023 performance of "Dang" on The Late Show as a paradigmatic example of post-internet music video aesthetics. Drawing on Karen Archey and Robin Peckham's (2014) conception of the post-internet as a "state of mind," the essay situates Polachek's televised yet digitally remediated performance within the feedback loop between online culture and artistic production. Through close analysis of the video's audiovisual synchronization, use of PowerPoint mimicry, and ironic engagement with the concept of synesthesia, the essay argues that Polachek performs a self-reflexive dialogue between human and machine. This dynamic is contextualized through Sonya Hofer's notion of "screenness," Michael Waugh's framework of the post-internet musician, and Philip Auslander's theory of digital liveness. Ultimately, "Dang" collapses distinctions between live and recorded media, performer and interface, and human and technological embodiment, illustrating how post-internet aesthetics reconfigure liveness as both a mediated and participatory experience.

Keywords: post-internet art; digital liveness; synesthesia; screenness; mediation; Caroline Polachek; performance studies; music video.

Karen Archey and Robin Peckham's definition of the post-internet is an understanding of the internet as a state of mind, rather than a literal time after the internet's emergence. In artistic practice, the post-internet lens is applied to describe the consciousness of the networks the art exists in from conception to dissemination (Archey and Peckham, 2014). While the music video predates everyday internet use,

the shift from television to online distribution of these videos allows for constant digital remediation, as one medium is representational of another (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Here, graphics gain or lose quality, fan-made videos are made, and new videos are created with this internet state of mind. For music videos created after this full integration of the online, the artist can create a symbiotic relationship between web identities and structures with their art. The artist's aesthetic choices and modes of distribution are informed by digital platforms and online communities, while these same networks absorb and recontextualize the work through sharing, remixing, and commentary. In this way, the artist and the web exist in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop, where artistic expression both reflects and influences digital culture.

These ideas are present in American indie artist Caroline Polachek's performance of her 2023 single *Dang*, live on CBS's *The Late Show* on October 17th, 2023. The song's live rendition places her in the context of the post-internet artist as she remains in dialogue with online culture and technological media for the entirety of her performance. Thus, what is the effect of the synesthetic relationship between Caroline Polachek's movements and vocals to the images presented on her screen? While synesthesia is thought as a visual reply to the sonic qualities of an audio, Caroline Polachek's *Dang* acts as an exploration of synesthesia creating dialogue between audio and video. Furthermore, it asks how does the remediation of a live performance filmed and uploaded online fold the digital imagery in the video in on itself?

In *"Dang" - Caroline Polachek (LIVE on The Late Show)* the video opens with Polachek giving a PowerPoint presentation while performing her song Dang, in a stylized take on a stereotypical presenter behind a makeshift chalkboard. The lyrics have no correlation with this choice in mise-en-scene, however the audio plays a large role in the timing of lights, cuts, and Polachek's movements as they follow the cues of the song's rhythm. After an initial close-up during the song's intro, the start of the beat prompts a cut into a long shot of Polachek and the presentation screen. From this point, the video keeps a consistent flow of changing PowerPoint slides and pans to Polachek's movements, always dictated by the song's drums, snaps, and "dangs" sung by Polachek herself, creating a synesthetic response as the lights and camera act as visual manifestations of the song's audio. The visuals of the PowerPoint slides are connected solely to the timing and aforementioned cues of the audio, displaying absurd and nonsensical text, charts, images, and diagrams that appear as a satire of internet memes or formal presentations themselves. The absurdity of these slides continues until a slide reading "SYNESTHESIA: NOT ACTUALLY REAL" appears and makes a subtle ironic nod to the video's form and the clear depiction of synesthesia in the next cut, in which the graphics of the screen act as a visual representation of the

song's audio, reaching an abrupt stop as the background lights dim. The screen goes blank for a second until Polachek begins screaming. The presentation visuals switch from static images to a video-like screensaver of moving beams of colour. While this is a pre-existing Apple screensaver, it appears synesthetic to Polachek's screams, as the pitch of the scream, slow arm movements, and outstretched body create a sense of audiovisual fidelity. This effect is made more coherent by a hard stop of both audio and presentation visuals after 15 seconds and a reappearance of the "SYNESTHESIA: NOT ACTUALLY REAL" slide. Despite refuting synesthesia as a concept and disassociating the performance audio from the visual affect of Polachek's body movements, the screen acts as a visual representation of Polachek's screams. After a brief pause in movement, the rhythm established in the earlier part of the video is restored and goes back to fast paced dancing and absurd diagrams.

Polachek is addressing the audience head-on with her mannerisms and use of PowerPoint. The mimicry of PowerPoint is an uncommon choice, as earlier forms of presentations and graphing predate the internet, however the content on the slides engages in a dialogue with pre-existing media, internet absurdism, and the aesthetics of information-based graphic design. In the slides that read "HOW MANY WOLVES ARE INSIDE YOU?" or "My apology" on the iPhone notes app, Polachek creates what Melissa Gronlund (2014) in "From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet" describes as a context collapse of online communication, pushing video artists to maintain a semblance of context in their works. Polachek and these slides however, lean into this context collapse. The performance's basis in post-internet aesthetics is created through moments of this absurdism created by a lack of context. Similar to how users quickly encounter memes on social media with little explanation or context, Polachek is remediating this feeling in her presentation, leaving audience members who have never heard of a "notes app apology" with a legible image they cannot understand contextually. Due to this lack of context, the music video follows the lead of post-internet video art that performs personal interest and online identity, rather than being in conversation with it (Gronlund 2014, p.6). This self-reflexive employment of presentation slides continues throughout the video, reaching a climax when audio and visuals stop in accordance with the "SYNESTHESIA: NOT ACTUALLY REAL." slide.

Synesthetic representation is present in the video from the beginning synchronization between audio cues and lighting, as if the sound of Polachek saying "dang" triggers a visual representation of a brief flashing light. Her movements embody the feel of the audio, moving her body to the imagined shapes and flows provoked by the music. While she refutes the claim of synesthesia to continue the use of context collapse and viewer detachment from logic and into absurdism, a clear moment of self-

reflexivity occurs when she begins to scream in-sync with the Apple computer screensaver. This representation can be contextualized through Sonya Hofer's (2017) "Screenness in Experimental Electronica Performances" in which Hofer proposes the idea of "screenness" as a paradigm for analyzing electronic performances, due to the contesting viewpoints of the laptop's performativity in the genre versus our practical relationships with it (p.16). Hofer's examination of screenness is framed in the context of live performance, which becomes challenged in the case of Caroline Polachek performing *Dang* on a live television show, later becoming a recorded music video accessible and replayable on YouTube. In this case, the screenness of the computer software folds in on itself, as its practical relationship with the song's production turns into an aesthetic representation of technology in the performance, before being turned back into a practical machine in which viewers access the video. Both the performance and viewing of this song are reliant on the computer, which cements Polachek as a post-internet musician as described by Michael Waugh (2017) in "'My Laptop Is an Extension of My Memory and Self': Post-Internet Identity, Virtual Intimacy and Digital Queering in Online Popular Music." In which, the post-internet musician is one that experiments visually and sonically with the omnipresence of technology, exploring posthumanism, queer theory, and cyborgism through performance. Understanding that the posthumanism is a fusion of human and machine that enhances the humanity of the individual (Waugh 2017, p.235), Caroline's scream evokes a sense of posthumanism through its synesthetic representation of a Mac screensaver, merging her physical body and voice with the technology at the center of this performance. Under the framework that the technology enhances the humanity of the posthuman, this synesthetic response to the computer software acts as a dialogue between Polachek and her internet inspired presentation. The artist follows Gronlund's framework for the post-internet artist performing personal interest and online identity, rather than being in conversation with it, yet challenges it by having moments of dialogue with the technological medium instead. In the moments where Polachek is presenting, she is performing directly to the audience and not dialoguing with the content on her screen. When the music breaks, her scream disrupts this performance as her voice and movements are pointed at the screensaver she is directly interacting with. This dialogue creates a merging of human and machine, but emphasizes Polachek's humanity. Throughout the video, her performance of the song remains precise and robotic, with carefully planned and timed choreography following the stable beat of the audio. The scream breaks this pattern, as the highly controlled audio and flow are interrupted and Polachek reveals a glimpse of emotion through her scream. Thus, in a moment of humanity, the technological aesthetics of the set remain

present and react to this humanness rather than obscure it, fully embracing both human and machine.

The video establishes a distinct separation between Caroline Polachek as a human performer, the digital interface of her presentation, and her synesthetic outburst of screams and movement that materializes her entanglement with the technological systems underpinning her song's creation and performance. Polachek uses elements of the post-human and a context collapse performance to create a music video that encompasses Waugh's framework of the post-internet musician. However, the video's title of "live" challenges the very notion of liveness due to the primary viewing practice of the video being a previously recorded music video. Referring back to Hofer's problems of laptop performativity, Polachek refutes popular critiques of experimental electronica performances "having a perceived lack of visual spectacle and gesture by the performer, whose main "live" instrument is the laptop" through turning the screen into a visual spectacle (Hofer 2017, p.16). However, an additional layer of context is added for viewers who did not watch the performance in-person and instead viewed this spectacle of Polachek's screen on their own laptop, phone, or television screen. Examining this idea through the lens of Philip Auslander's (2012) "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective", the concept of digital liveness emerges as a specific way of "being involved with something." and understanding that the experience of liveness results from "our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us" (Auslander, 9). The live audience of the Late Show would have understood this performance as a traditional live performance rather than one of digital liveness. However, the primary viewing mechanism for this music video is now reliant on the internet, which complicates Auslander's idea that "we perceive real-time response in some cases as a demand that concretizes a claim to liveness." (Auslander 2012, p.8). Is the audience applause in the background defined as this "real-time response" to the performance? Or, is it how viewers relate their viewing practices to the themes of the video, watching it in their real-time rather than the real-time of the recording. The post-internet artist Waugh describes comments on the omnipresence of technology. Thus, I argue that the viewing practice of watching *"Dang" (LIVE on the Late Show)* through a computer is a part of the live performance, as the viewer is not just responding to the video, but actively participating in these post-internet aesthetics through their viewing practices. However, this applies solely to music videos such as Dang that intentionally use context collapse and post-internet aesthetics in their music video, as the viewing practices of these videos give the original performance an enhanced meaning through detached, online viewership of them.

"Dang" - Caroline Polachek (LIVE on the Late Show) is a perfect example of the post-internet music video, using synesthetic representations of electronic-based music and computers themselves to perform Gronlund's idea of the "context collapse" in contemporary video art and challenge criticisms of the genre's "screenness" outlined by Hofer. Polachek's use of technology in her performance is both a performance of internet aesthetics to the audience and a dialogue between the human performer and the machine mediating their musical performance. The video's post-internet aesthetics challenge traditional notions of liveness as I argue that the liveness of the original performance for the audience of *The Late Show* is different from the digital liveness of watching the recorded version online. Viewing practices give the post-internet's omnipresence of technology and distinct online aesthetics an enhanced meaning in *Dang*, making the viewer's screen and Caroline Polachek's screen intertwined in the music video's form.

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